

Huang Chun-Chieh and Comparative Philosophy: Multiple Ways of Studying Confucian Ideas and Notions across Texts and Contexts¹

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Abstract

Confucianism cannot be posited as merely a philosophical tradition, but can nevertheless be said to possess key elements of a philosophy of ethics, which have time and again been able to transcend both the tradition's historical as well cultural bounds. While Huang Chun-chieh points out that it is more appropriate to speak of Confucianisms, plural, core Confucian values and notions possess the ability to move from context to context while retaining certain characteristics and changing others. The proper approach to the study of Confucianisms should therefore be interdisciplinary and in line with the new method of East Asian Confucianisms, where philosophy should also have an important part to play. Understood within the bounds of the project of Confucian philosophy (a project that can be seen as dynamic and ongoing in the global environment of the 21st century), a broader and more diverse range of expressions of Confucian thought—particularly through the methods of both East Asian Confucianisms and of comparative philosophy as an effort of a more equal and inclusive philosophical dialogue—could help throw new light on important aspects of Confucian philosophical thought. While the methods of East Asian Confucianisms and of comparative philosophy are different in their aims and scope, they also share common sensibilities.

Keywords: Huang Chun-chieh, East Asian Confucianisms, Comparative Philosophy, Text, Context

Huang Chun-Chieh in primerjalna filozofija: načini proučevanja konfucijanskih idej in pojmov skozi različna besedila in kontekste

Izvleček

Konfucijanske tradicije ne moremo razumeti kot zgolj filozofske, lahko pa rečemo, da vsebujejo ključne elemente etične filozofije, ki jim je vedno znova uspelo preseči tako

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svoje zgodovinske kot tudi kulturne okvire. Huang Chun-chieh poudari, da bi bilo tako bolj primerno govoriti o konfucijanstvih, torej v množini, osrednje konfucijanske vrednote pa imajo sposobnost premikanja iz konteksta v kontekst ter po eni strani ohranjajo, po drugi pa spreminjajo določene značilnosti. Ustrezen pristop k študiju konfucijanstev mora biti zato interdisciplinaren in v skladu z novo metodo vzhodnoazijskih konfucijanstev, v takem projektu pa mora imeti pomembno mesto tudi filozofija. Če jih preučujemo v okviru projekta konfucijanske filozofije (projekta, ki je dinamičen in poteka v globalnem okolju 21. stoletja), lahko bolj raznoliki izrazi konfucijanske misli – še posebej z metodama vzhodnoazijskih konfucijanstev in primerjalne filozofije kot napora enakopravnjšega in inkluzivnejšega filozofskega dialoga – pomagajo na novo osvetliti pomembne vidike konfucijanske filozofske misli. Čeprav se metodi vzhodnoazijskih konfucijanstev in primerjalne filozofije razlikujeta v ciljih in obsegu, si delita določeno skupno razumevanje.

Ključne besede: Huang Chun-chieh, vzhodnoazijska konfucijanstva, primerjalna filozofija, besedilo, kontekst

Introduction

The article first aims to examine the study of East Asian Confucianisms as proposed by Huang Chun-chieh. The method of East Asian Confucianisms represents an alternative to the more nationally motivated studies of the Confucian traditions in the 20th century. It also offers an alternative to the prevailing academic methods and models of the past, which were mostly based on the European and American cultural experience (see Huang 2013a) and in East Asia resulted in a kind of “fidelity studies”. Furthermore, the method also seems to offer an important way of revitalizing the field of Confucian ideas in the global context of the 21st century. The second aim of the article is to examine the relationship between the method of East Asian Confucianisms and comparative philosophy as a call for more inclusive philosophical dialogues. To show that while the goals and scope of the two may differ, there is much overlap and both gain by sharing common solutions to common problems.

Huang Chun-chieh shows how the outdated notions of the “centre *versus* periphery”, as well as the “orthodox *versus* heterodox” should be abandoned and the field of East Asian Confucianisms seen as an interconnected whole, not in some abstract sense, but as a living tradition and a concrete intellectual history. Huang Chun-chieh is aware of the problems that the notion of East Asia itself carries, but his proposal for the method of East Asian Confucianisms tackles these problems head on. Huang sets out his views on the contextual turn, a concrete

historical process in which the canonical Confucian texts are seen as the basis of a common discourse among Confucians of all East Asian countries, sharing a common Confucian consciousness; but in which such discourse is also always influenced by local historical and cultural factors. This leads to the development of a kind of intellectual historical approach, but also a kind of comparative Confucian studies field, where different local variants of Confucianism are connected by both concrete historical processes as well as by core Confucian values, such as self-cultivation and the notion of humaneness (*ren* 仁).

The comparative philosophical study should not be seen as strictly parallel to the method of East Asian Confucianisms, but in many ways, rather as its extension—as both a study of diverse ideas and an advocacy for more inclusion in the global philosophical dialogues. It should learn from the very same processes which are under study by the method of East Asian Confucianisms and understand the way in which such exchanges happened. The method of East Asian Confucianisms has great potential to bring new light to and re-evaluate the rich tapestry of Confucian ideas, as well as different developments of such ideas within the variant traditions. Comparative philosophy must be seen as a living process of the exchange of ideas and a meeting of worldviews which can illuminate invisible paradigms and bring about new paradigm shifts.

The method of East Asian Confucianisms strives to solve the many problems connected to the political and cultural identities of East Asia and offers compelling solutions in their place. In many ways, comparative philosophy also shares many of these problems—those of chauvinism, of a demand for fidelity, and of incommensurability—and so the solutions offered can be seen as compelling from the point of view of both. These two methods are shown to share many of the same sensibilities and should work hand-in-hand.

East Asian Confucianisms as Both a Field of Study and a Method of Humanities

Huang Chun-chieh lays out his project of East Asian Confucianisms as both a field of study and a method of humanities, offering a new systematic way of studying the different Confucian traditions, based on the idea of “unity in diversity” (see Huang 2015), focusing on “process over results” (ibid.), and taking into account the need of scholars in the 21st century to be “thinking from East Asia” (see Huang 2013a). Huang argues that “‘East Asian Confucianisms’ is an intellectual community that is transnational and multi-lingual. It has evolved in the interaction between Confucian ‘universal values’ and the local conditions present in each

East Asian country” (Huang 2015, 7). He furthermore sets out the rationale for such a field of study:

The rationale for proposing East Asian Confucianisms as a field of study is twofold. On the one hand ‘East Asian Confucianisms’ embraces the Confucian traditions of China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. On the other hand, the varied Confucian traditions in these cultures did not form a mechanical assemblage, but rather a comprehensive, developing, systematic whole. (ibid., 11)

While the Confucian tradition may have originated in the Shandong peninsula over two millennia ago, it was originally only a “local wisdom” (ibid., 16). It then went on to develop its own set of values that had by the 17th century been transmitted across a number of East Asian countries, where they were met by differing local environments. Huang points out that notions such as the distinction between the Chinese and barbarians (*huayi zhibian* 華夷之辨), loyalty or doing one’s best (*zhong* 忠) and of filial piety (*xiao* 孝) “all strongly reflect specific features of Chinese culture and are deeply rooted and coloured by the culture’s agrarian economy, clan society, and authoritarian order” (ibid.), so “it is not surprising that as these ideas spread outside of China to Korea and Japan, tensions appeared due to the differences in regional conditions. Such tensions then caused a transformation in Confucian ideas, changing them into diverse versions of East Asian Confucianisms” (ibid.).

This process can primarily be seen in two ways. Firstly, it brought diverse interpretations and valuations to the readings of Confucian canonical texts such as the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*) and the *Mengzi* 孟子 (*Mencius*), the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*) and the *Daxue* 大學 (*Great Learning*). And secondly, many of the ideas and notions of Chinese Confucianism were themselves reinterpreted when they reached other East Asian countries like Korea and Japan. For example, Huang argues that the meanings of such core concepts as *gong* 公 (public, fair), *si* 私 (personal, private), *xin* 心 (mind-heart or heart-mind), *zhong* 忠 and *xiao* 孝 went through radical changes, and these notions attracted entirely different interpretations, for example, in Japan (ibid., 17–18). Thus “far from a uniform broadcast of Chinese Confucianism, East Asian Confucianisms exhibits a rich diversity rooted in the various local milieu and specific ethnic cultures of those regions” (ibid., 18).

Huang argues that East Asian Confucianisms as a field of study and a method represent a “unity in diversity” (ibid., 9) and notes:

The special feature, the wholeness, of East Asian Confucianisms exists in the midst of and not over and above the cultural and intellectual exchange activities among the respective East Asian countries. Consequently, they must be regarded as a sort of continuously evolving family of intellectual traditions. Although this sort of temporal and continuously evolving family has historical roots in the pre-Qin Confucian school, as soon as the downward and outward flow of Confucianism encountered different cultures and societies of other times and places, distinctive Confucian trademarks of each place were formed and set. We must appreciate that while Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) learning is very different from the humanist school of Neo-Confucianism, the difference between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Zhu Xi learning is even greater. Therefore, research in East Asian Confucianisms cannot countenance such theoretical pre-suppositions as “orthodox *versus* heterodox” or “centre *versus* periphery”. (Huang 2018, 77)

Trying to answer Tsuda Sōkichi’s 津田左右吉 (1873–1961) objection to the idea of “East Asian civilization”, Huang presents the field of East Asian Confucianisms both as a kind of “reality of history” and as the “method of the humanities” (Thompson 2017, 13–14). He argues, firstly, that through the lens of the field of East Asian Confucianisms the distinctions such as the “centre *versus* periphery” and of “orthodox *versus* heterodox” can be overcome and the concept of East Asian Confucianisms itself can be set up as “a ‘method’ that illuminates concrete processes whereby the so-called peripheries form their own respective versions of Confucianism” (Huang 2015, 14). And, secondly, that through the study of interconnected historical developments of the ideas of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese Confucianisms, East Asian Confucianisms can be shown to emerge as a *system* of thought with distinct East Asian characteristics (ibid., 12).

And yet Huang is also cognizant of the fact that the notion of East Asian Confucianisms carries with it a great historical burden.

For example, the memory of imperial Japan’s announcement of its ambition to establish a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” in 1933, now understood as Japan’s pretext for invading East Asia, causes deep, gut-wrenching pain to the peoples of East Asia, particularly in China and Korea. Consequently, down to the present, the term “East Asia” is heavily burdened with historical baggage. With the rise of China at the beginning of the twenty-first century, memories of the historical Chinese empire have begun to engage the attention of the academic world. It is a

historical fact that “East Asian Confucianisms” arose on the Shandong Peninsula some 2,500 years ago, and some scholars suspect that if China develops into a superpower in the twenty-first century then the advocacy of the values of “East Asian Confucianisms” in China would simply lead to an atavistic revival of “national” Chinese learning and culture in the twenty-first century. (Huang 2018, 81)

Huang identifies the two main problems of the notion of East Asian Confucianisms as 1) the problem of the conflict between political and cultural identity faced by Confucians in all of the East Asian countries, and 2) the problem of how the cultural subjectivity of Confucians in each East Asian country can manifest itself in shared universal values (*ibid.*, 82).

By presenting “East Asian Confucianisms” as a methodology rather than as a reality, Huang is trying to avoid its being subverted into an illicit new-imperialist discourse (*ibid.*, 81). He also tries to show that while national political identities of East Asian Confucians are harder to transcend, “from the perspective of cultural identity, Confucians in each of the East Asian countries also shared the Confucian core values of *ren* 仁 and self-cultivation. Hence, these Confucian common core values ultimately transcended national boundaries and can be regarded as values that might be shared by all of humankind” (*ibid.*). Ideas that were able to transcend national boundaries, were able to do so because they possess universal appeal.

Huang also argues that the study of East Asian Confucianisms, instead of focusing on the results, should rather focus on the process by which different Confucian subjectivities were formed.

Interpreted in this sense, Confucianism becomes a parameter for the formation of the *subjectivities* of each and every East Asian region. What is important to observe here is the *process* by which such specific subjectivity is constructed, be it in Japan or Korea, *not* the “authenticity” or “orthodoxy” of a specific regional Confucianism. “East Asian Confucianisms” are not something ready-cast, nor a frame of thought that exists above the concrete process of the development of Confucianisms in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Rather it exists only in the interactive formations among East Asian regions, including China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Vietnam. (Huang 2015, 14)

East Asian Confucianisms as a field and method of study then also arises from the way Confucianism had been studied and used to prop up national identities in the

past (see for instance Hmeljak Sangawa 2017, 154–55; Culiberg 2015, 232). The problems of its notions are exactly the ones Huang Chun-chieh aims to overcome with his new methodology.

[W]e can view the rise of the field of East Asian Confucianisms on the new stage of scholarship in the twenty-first century as a reaction to the form of Confucian studies conducted in the Chinese-language academia of the twentieth century. For example, twentieth-century Chinese New Confucian philosophers tended to view Confucianism narrowly as a segment of their national and ethnic identity, especially as bound up with the vast and far-reaching historical traumas and transformations of the early twentieth century. (Huang 2018, 79)

East Asian Confucianisms emerges as a project that aims to overcome such problems of the past by accounting for the *subjectivity* of all East Asian countries within a common Confucian world of ideas—taking into account the different developments of a common core of ideas and notions within different local environments and cultural contexts. Thus this becomes in effect the study of the *inter-subjectivity* of East Asian *subjectivities*. Being well aware of both the political and cultural historical issues that burden the notion of East Asia as any kind of cultural and political entity, Huang is proposing to overcome such difficulties within the field of study of Confucian thought by overcoming exactly the historical and political notions of the “centre *versus* periphery”, historically represented, for example, by the Chinese Empire and its tributary system, built upon the difference between the Chinese and barbarians (see Huang 2013a).

On the other hand, the method of East Asian Confucianisms seems to also offer a compelling way to revitalize the studies of Confucian ideas themselves, by being both respectful of the cultural diversity of East Asian countries while also following the common philosophical threads that link the different interpretations of these ideas and notions. The development of Confucian ideas and notions within the different variant Confucian traditions is freed from the constraints of the “orthodox *versus* heterodox” debates, and reconnected into a common world of core Confucian values, seen as having transcended national boundaries and thus possessing universal appeal. As the Confucians of different East Asian countries read the same classics and reflected on them within their own historical, cultural and political environments, commented on them and discussed them among themselves, they developed a common Confucian consciousness, though they retained their political identities. The principle of “unity in diversity” proposed by Huang seems like a productive approach to the revitalization of the philosophical study of

Confucian ideas in the 21st century global environment. And finally, while Huang stresses that he certainly does not mean to argue for the creation of any sort of “reflexive Orientalism”, much less any kind of self-absorbed “national learning”, he does point out that:

[T]he necessity of advocating “East Asian Confucianisms” as a distinct field is a proactive intellectual response to the predilection of those twentieth-century East Asian academicians who have interpreted the East according to the West. In this sense, East Asian Confucianisms manifests the vital mission to revisit the Confucian core values as the mainstream of East Asian cultures that might be expanded to provide the foundation of a new Humanism for the age of globalization. (Huang 2018, 80–81)

Built upon the principle of “thinking from East Asia”, the method of East Asian Confucianisms argues for setting an alternative to the academic trends of the past—where the East had always been interpreted according to the West—and to form a method of study that takes into account the specific circumstances and experiences of East Asia (see Huang 2013a). This, again, is not to say that Huang is arguing for the creation of any kind of “reflexive Orientalism”, it is rather a stance which argues against those models and trends of the past, that brought about the “fidelity studies” relationship between Europe and East Asia, and also argues for a wider and a more inclusive idea of “universal values” than has been effectively observed in the past.

Stressing the importance of studying both the different local variants of Confucianism, but also the common core of ideas that connects them, Huang’s project aims at excavating those “universal Confucian values and ideas”—ideas that were able to transcend national boundaries and have thus proven to possess universal appeal. In understanding the processes by which these values and notions had already negotiated their places within different cultural contexts of East Asia, Huang presents a vision of bringing these same processes and values to the global stage.

East Asian Confucianisms is a unique and self-formed systematic study. It is not just a mechanical piecemeal assemblage of regional versions of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese Confucianisms. Rather, as Confucians in each of these places recite and are immersed in the same classics, they aspire to become the sages in Confucian core values, transcending regional limitations. This common core of Confucianism forms a system of thought without the stigmas of centre-border and means-end discriminations. “East Asian Confucianisms” is a field of study that

rids us of the vestiges of boundaries and limitations that still remain in the present time and takes in East Asia as a whole. In our present era of globalization, we find that in various traditions of East Asian Confucianisms there exist important spiritual resources that could facilitate dialogue among world civilizations. (Huang 2015, 19)

Texts in Contexts, Actors in History

As a method, East Asian Confucianisms stresses “process over results”. Not being interested in the image of a static and perfect version of a common East Asian culture, East Asian Confucianisms studies the historical processes by which Confucian ideas had historically negotiated their place within different cultural contexts; but it also studies the different interpretations themselves and the richness of meaning that such processes produced. It thus possesses both an aspect of intellectual history as well as an aspect of comparative studies, and has the potential to bring about both a better understanding of the historical processes of the diversification of ideas, as well as a deeper understanding of how ideas survive such processes and are enriched by them.

Confucianism is a diverse tradition, rich in both ideas and practice. When trying to pinpoint the thread that connects different variant Confucian traditions, Huang identifies two major basic principles that connect them all together—firstly, the nature of Confucianism as a practical philosophy and family ethics; and secondly, the central Confucian notion of *ren* 仁.

Confucians in all of the East Asian countries firmly believe that the foundation and starting point of Confucianism lay in a self-cultivation process that involves extending sympathy—proceeding along a continuum from self, to family, to society, to state, then on to world. East Asian Confucians all hold, in effect, that the transformation of self is the starting point of transforming the world. [...] Fundamentally, East Asian Confucian philosophies are constituted as practical philosophies of self-cultivation approaches and family ethics. (Huang 2018, 78)

The notion of the family as the central metaphor of Confucian ethics has been discussed by Rosemont and Ames², who have also tried to convincingly argue for a new interpretation of Confucian ethics as a system of ethics *sui generis* that does

2 See for example Rosemont and Ames's introduction to their translation of *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence* (Rosemont and Ames 2009, 1–64).

not have a simple equivalent in the Western philosophical tradition (Rosemont and Ames 2016). The notion of self-cultivation also marks the Confucian tradition in a fundamental way, as it charges Confucian scholars with not simply thinking about the right way of living, but also practicing it and advocating for it. While Confucian notions may have originated from the canonical Confucian texts, they cannot remain abstract and above Confucian practices—they are always drawn to the everyday life of the practitioners.

And Confucian practice itself is as diverse as the ways that people have historically used to cultivate themselves.

The “practice” of Confucianism [...] depended on historical context. It could be a mix of various elements that we today might describe using adjectives including religious, political, literary, artistic, educational, scientific, medical, and many others. So Confucianism is/was a religion in some manifestations, a political science in others, a literary practice or medical tradition in others. Most often it was a constellation of several of those and more. The nature of that constellation differed depending on the particular historic moment and society within which Confucianism manifested. (Paramore 2016)

Still, Huang argues that East Asian Confucianisms can be seen to form a coherent world of ideas—ideas through which Confucians of different countries, who read the same ancient Classics, were setting themselves on the same path of becoming truly human (of even becoming Confucian sages). And at the centre of Confucian ethics is most certainly the notion of *ren* 仁.

The second core value shared in common by the Confucians of each East Asian country and tradition is Confucius’ teaching of *ren* 仁, rendered variously in English as “humanity”, “humaneness”, “humane heartedness”, “benevolence”, and “authoritative personhood”. (Huang 2018, 78)

Humaneness is central among those Confucian notions that had been developed across many historical eras and many different cultural contexts. As notions such as *ren* gather nuance in meaning, they also gather interpretative power and the power to open up discussions among Confucian scholars of different countries. A great example of this that Huang himself studies at length is the discourse on Zhu Xi’s interpretation of the notion of *ren* 仁, presented in his *Ren shuo* 仁說 (*Treatise on Humaneness*), which in following centuries created a greater reaction in both Korean Confucianism, as well as in Edo period 江戸 Japan (1603–1868). Through the Japanese scholars’ answers to Zhu Xi, for example, Huang observes

a common preference for practical learning over metaphysical discussions as one of the main characteristics of Japanese Confucianism.³

Another important aspect of the method of East Asian Confucianisms is not only in recognizing Confucianism as a common world of ideas, but also in recognizing the inherent open and dialogical nature of the Confucian tradition itself—that more than anything Confucianism can be seen as a shared and open discourse on the ideas and notions set out in the canonical Confucian literature and developed through the countless lives of people striving to cultivate themselves in the way of Confucius, enriching the Confucian way and passing it on. Even the very nature of the *Analects* and Confucius' pragmatic teaching can be seen to facilitate this.⁴ Thus Confucian notions themselves necessarily invite reinterpretations, but these are such that they do not necessarily invalidate the previously established meanings.

The interplay between meaning and practice is the way of Confucian ideas and notions—and is also the way in which they are transmitted across contexts. The tension between the “universal values” of Confucianism and the local environments in which they were being reinterpreted can also be readily observed in history, as this process was not invisible or unreflected upon. It was a part of the same lively intellectual conversation, and was carried out beyond the groups of Confucians in each country. New meaning was being introduced into a new local environment, but at the same time it was being introduced in such a way that the environment could absorb and naturalize it—so this represented not only a kind of conversation, but also a kind of negotiation; and the Confucians of each country were not only scholars, but also advocates for these ideas.⁵

On the one hand these processes produced differences—but seen from the point of view of East Asian Confucianisms they also produced a kind of richness.

[C]onsider Confucius's *Analects*, a classic produced in China's intellectual culture. The spiritual homeland of Confucius was concerned with managing the world, and yet it also had its broad, deep, and transcendent aspirations. Confucius and his disciples were able to find [...] spirituality in the ethical relationships of daily life. After the *Analects* was transmitted east to Japan, however, Tokugawa 徳川 (1603–1868) Confucian scholars

3 For an overview of how Zhu Xi's *Treatise of Humaneness* was discussed in Japan and ways in which Japanese scholar had criticized Zhu Xi's definition of the notion, see for example Huang 2015, 113–30.

4 For a discussion on Confucius' pragmatic approach to words in the *Analects*, see Yang 2007.

5 For a study of the naturalization of Confucianism in Japan, see Wildman Nakai 1980.

discarded the intellectual world of the text's Chinese cultural context (including such concepts as Heaven, the Way, human nature, and destiny) and recontextualized it in the practical realism that typified Japanese intellectual tendencies. They thereby assimilated the *Analects* to Japanese culture, so that it became a link to the spiritual world of Japanese intellectuals for the next three centuries. Only because it underwent this process of recontextualization by Japanese scholars did the *Analects* become generally congenial to Japanese intellectuals. Additionally, because Japanese scholars had recontextualized the *Analects*, Tokugawa scholars were able to read in new meanings for the age, and thus could infuse the text with a new significance. (Huang 2013a)

The process can be seen as twofold, when considered in this positive light. Firstly, it allowed Confucianism to naturally overcome its internal cultural tensions, produced by such notions as the difference between the Chinese and barbarians or that of the "middle kingdom" (*Zhongguo* 中國). These notions are transmitted to a new local environment, where they are infused with new meaning and are, through a kind of negotiation and advocacy, developed within a new cultural context. Of course, as shown by the study of variant Confucian traditions, from the point of view of meaning this is not a one-way street of enrichment of notions—this critical process, this negotiation, both adds and subtracts certain dimensions; but seen from the point of view of the method of East Asian Confucianisms, where previous meanings are not lost, but studied in a common world of ideas, new meanings simply add both nuance and universal appeal.

As has been remarked upon, this living and rewarding process can be observed in the history of ideas itself, not simply in an abstract way.

Viewed from the perspective of the experience of cultural exchanges in East Asia (*via* the exchange of texts, ideas, and people), all exchanges take place in the contexts of society, politics, and culture. Even the languages spoken by the people involved in these exchanges have their specific linguistic contexts. For this reason, people on both sides of the cultural exchange must be viewed as performers on the stage of history, and exchanges should be viewed as historical events. When we begin from this perspective, we can enter into a better method for studying decontextualization in the history of cultural exchange in East Asia. (Huang 2013a)

But if the method of East Asian Confucianisms here comes close to what might be considered as intellectual history, it also possesses an undeniable comparative aspect, especially when the ideas and notions presented are studied for their

meaning and philosophical significance. If the different variant Confucianisms are not only to be defined by their cultural contexts, but are also taken to be philosophically or practically distinct, then the variant traditions and their developed notions are necessarily compared among themselves for such distinctions to be made apparent. And while intellectual history has traditionally been studied more within national boundaries of different East Asian countries and had been closely connected to national identities, it is this comparative approach—one which simultaneously overcomes the divide of “centre *versus* periphery”, “orthodox *versus* heterodox”, which adds new possibilities to the study of Confucian texts within contexts in more productive ways.

Last but not least, the method of East Asian Confucianisms also seems to understand that the project of the study of Confucian ideas must extend along a line: from studying the common core of Confucian ideas—Confucian canonical literature—to studying the variant traditions of Confucianism in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, affording them equal status inside the family of intellectual traditions and observing the historical developments of Confucian ideas within each; and finally, to studying the teachings and works of those concrete actors in history, those Confucian scholars and advocates of Confucian ideas who devoted their lives in service of studying and following the Confucian way. Only such a comprehensive study which takes into consideration both the different contexts as well as the different texts within those different contexts can yield the best results.

To respect the historical tendencies, socio-political factors and conceptual orientations, but also the intention and personal projects of those Confucian thinkers themselves, one has therefore to seek a balance between studying the texts and studying their contexts. As Huang puts it:

Cultural interactions are dynamic processes. For this reason, in researching decontextualization and reconceptualization in cultural exchanges, if we rely solely on [...] textualism, we will find ourselves “buried in words”, to resurrect the ridicule of Qing Confucians. Yet if we [only] examine the production and movement of new meanings after ideas or texts were introduced into different regions and carefully consider the factors behind the new meanings against their historical background (contextualism), we will be blind to the whole. For this reason, whenever we choose between the approaches of textualism and contextualism, we must strive to seek a dynamic balance between them in order to avoid being either illogical or impractical. (Huang 2013a, 20)

East Asian Confucianisms and Comparative Philosophy

Among different comparative disciplines, comparative philosophy can be argued to hold a specific place. As Botz-Bornstein points out:

Among the numerous comparative disciplines practiced in academic research (e.g., comparative literature, comparative religion, or comparative linguistics), comparative philosophy has an outstanding position. In the case of comparative literature, it is not really the subject of the discipline (e.g., “literature”) that engages one in comparative activities; rather, a certain “science of literature” compares its subjects to each other. Also, in the case of comparative religion, we do not really mean that “religion” itself would become comparative but rather that a “comparative science of religion” compares different religions. The exceptional status of philosophy becomes clear here. Philosophy, by comparing different philosophies to each other, does not become a “comparative science of philosophy”, but *is* philosophy. (Botz-Bornstein 2006, 157)

But if comparative philosophy *is* philosophy, then what does “comparative” add to the normal discipline of philosophy? Should not philosophy already be also comparative by its very nature? Goto-Jones points out that the answer to such a question might in fact not be so easy: “[T]he question of the nature and dimensions of comparative philosophy is tied inextricably and deeply to the perennial of question, *what is philosophy?* Indeed, it may be the same question.” (Goto-Jones 2013, 138)

The question of *what is philosophy* is certainly beyond the scope of the present article—as is, it seems, the question of what exactly is comparative philosophy in and of itself: what, if anything, should be considered its canonical texts, what is its fundamental methodology, what is its place within the discipline of philosophy as such. But at the very least it can be argued broadly that comparative philosophy has heretofore been a specific way in which European-American philosophical traditions relate to other (non-European, non-American) traditions of thought. And while it has been asserted in this article that Confucianism should also be considered a philosophical tradition, this assertion is already one which may not necessarily be completely uncontroversial outside the field of comparative philosophy.

While Kiri Paramore argues that “any account of the existential, practical, and resolutely historical nature of [Confucian] tradition makes it more (and certainly less) than what would be defined as ‘philosophers’ doing ‘philosophy’ within the

contemporary Western context” (Paramore 2016), it can also be argued that defining philosophy only in such a narrow way actually traps it inside its specific Europe–America centric expression, and robs it of much of its universal potential and dignity. It is precisely this narrow view—of a kind of “true” or “professional” philosophy—which comparative philosophy is set against.

Huang and Tucker therefore offer a much broader reading of the notion of philosophy:

What [is here understood] by philosophy consists of [...] [the] sort of ongoing engagement in critical, self-reflective discussion of and speculative theorizing about ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, political theory, and spiritual problems, as well as aesthetics, cosmology, and ontology, with the goal being the attainment of a more profound understanding of ourselves, others, the world, and the universe at large. Confucians in East Asia have been doing this for over two millennia, since the time of Confucius. (Huang and Tucker 2014, 4)

Described in these broader terms, philosophy is freed to encompass non-European and non-American traditions, but is again faced with the problem of defining the relationships between ideas and even whole worldviews belonging to one or another of those traditions. As philosophy has historically tended to prioritize notions, values and ideas that have been developed within the European–American philosophical traditions, and in European languages, other traditions have in the global context for a long time been interpreted according to these ideas and through these languages. The task of comparative philosophy is then not only to bring philosophers of different traditions to the same table, but actually and more importantly to bring them to each other’s libraries and force them to learn to read and think anew.

As Botz–Bornstein points out, there is actually a certain inner self-contradiction to the notion of comparative philosophy:

Comparative philosophy is identified by an inner self-contradiction: on the one hand, philosophy, like literature and art, is part of a cultural experience that cannot be fully materialized because it is an intimate process. In principle, such intimate processes cannot be “compared” (there is, e.g., no “comparative art”). On the other hand, philosophy is *itself* one of those materializing disciplines that attempt to transform culture, art, religion, *et cetera* into something that can be “grasped” through concepts, ideas, and notions and—finally—be compared. (Botz–Bornstein 2006, 157–58)

Philosophy as a cultural experience and intimate process is transformed through philosophy as one of the materializing disciplines into something which can be grasped—but in its striving for universality can actually lose sight of itself as a cultural experience and intimate process. Comparative philosophy forces what is grasped to be also compared and offers specific philosophical traditions the chance to recognize other philosophical traditions as also cultural experiences and intimate processes, and in doing so to recognize itself as such as well, and to finally re-examine its own universality.

Goto-Jones remarks:

[E]ither comparative philosophy is not about philosophy at all, or it is the richest and fullest expression of the philosophical endeavor, which means that we must revisit what it means to be a professional philosopher. In this frame, contemporary comparative philosophy is a kind of suicidal endeavor, striving to make itself redundant through the transformation of philosophy *per se* into a more inclusive field. (Goto-Jones 2013, 136)

But while one can in one's mind's eye imagine a sort of fantastical and abstract meeting of ideas in a fanciful world of their own, interestingly enough, it is the method of East Asian Confucianisms and the study of Confucian traditions which offers some insight into the nature of such exchanges. What the method of East Asian Confucianisms is very cognizant of is that it was exactly the concrete exchange of texts, ideas and people that helped Confucian ideas transcend national boundaries—it was not some abstract movement, strange meeting or imagined battle of ideas. It was in the encounter of people with those ideas, people with those texts and people with others in whom these processes had in fact been played out.

Comparative philosophy presumably yearns to be able to set up a stage for such encounters, but it must also understand that the only way these exchanges happen is through the dedicated work of dedicated people, who in themselves become able to transcend their particular traditions and worldviews. And so, in the end, the project of comparative philosophy, like that of the transmission and contextual turn of Confucian notions, might yet depend less on transforming philosophy itself (which should not really need such a transformation), but rather on reforming what it actually means to be a philosopher in the 21st century. Like the Confucian scholars of old could not be the transmitters of those ideas without not only immersing themselves in them, striving to understand and to follow the way, but in many ways also becoming their advocates.⁶

6 For this process in Japan, again see Wildman Nakai 1980.

And when philosophers take up this task, do not then the same problems of the intersubjectivity of various subjectivities that they might represent, addressed in some ways by the method of East Asian Confucianisms, also show themselves in the field comparative philosophy? In fact, the method of East Asian Confucianisms might be able to offer compelling solutions for both fields. Through its striving to overcome the notions of “centre *versus* periphery” and “orthodox *versus* heterodox”, the method can address the problems of chauvinism. Through the idea of focusing on the “process instead of results”, the method addresses the problem of seeing philosophical traditions as static and forever in their ideal forms. In studying the variant traditions as well as the common core of ideas, focusing on a kind of “concrete universal” (see Huang 2013a) the method of East Asian Confucianisms addresses both the universal as well as the particular.

In all these points, comparative philosophy should nurture similar sensibilities. And what this actually means is that philosophers should nurture them.

If the project of East Asian Confucianisms is also in excavating core Confucian ideas and values—ideas that have been able to survive the contextual turn and be enriched by it, that have demonstrated their universal appeal—then comparative philosophy can perhaps train philosophers for the new kind of exchange of ideas in the global context of the 21st century, by looking at those processes and learning from them. But while trying to follow the solutions to various problems offered by the method of East Asian Confucianisms, for the opening of more inclusive and harmonious dialogues, comparative philosophy should also remain a more confrontational project, both towards philosophy as such and in its task of bringing together philosophers of different traditions, for its most lasting appeal remains in the way in which it might not only be able to reveal those hidden paradigmatic differences, but also bring about new paradigmatic shifts.

Both methods should work hand-in-hand to help construct a new philosophical approach for the 21st century to both Confucianisms as well to philosophy. As Henry Rosemont puts it:

If we are reluctant to participate in the requiem mass currently being offered for philosophy, if we wish instead to seek new perspectives that might enable the discipline to become as truly all-encompassing in the future as it has mistakenly been assumed to have been in the past, we must begin to develop a more international philosophical language which incorporates the insights of all of the world-wide historical tradition of thinkers who addressed the questions of who and what we are, and why and how we should lead our all-too-human lives. (Rosemont 2016, 56–57)

Conclusion

East Asian Confucianisms as a field and method proposed by Huang Chun-chieh, based on the principles of “unity in diversity”, “process over results” and “thinking from East Asia”, is a comprehensive project, which, though not a philosophical project *per se*, also offers a viable way of revitalizing the study of Confucian philosophical ideas across East Asian variant Confucian traditions. As it deals with the intersubjectivity of East Asian cultural subjectivities, it possesses many of the same sensibilities and offers compelling solutions to problems facing both it and the method of comparative philosophy.

Since Confucianism can be seen as both a philosophical as well as a richly practical tradition, the study of East Asian Confucianism necessarily demands an interdisciplinary approach, which can help highlight different cultural nuances. But the study of Confucian ideas itself represents both an effort in intellectual history as well as philosophy—and the effort of comparative philosophy with regard to opening up the discipline to a wider inclusivity. The study of the diverging interpretations of Confucian ideas, stemming from the varied cultural peculiarities and contexts they arose in, also highlights the ways in which Confucian ideas are transformed without losing their “universal appeal”. In studying the historical processes and historical actors within them, the method of East Asian Confucianisms illuminates the work of Confucian scholars across East Asia—not only of studying Confucian ideas, but also of practicing and advocating for them.

It is comparative philosophy which in a sense is trying to bring about such a shift in the global context. Transforming philosophy to be more inclusive actually means reforming the attitudes of philosophers, and in this comparative philosophers can also learn from those Confucian scholars who in the past had been the students of new ideas and their advocates. Comparative philosophy should study Confucian ideas both as philosophy and comparative philosophy. Moreover, as both the method of East Asian Confucianisms as well as comparative philosophy seem to be striving to open up ways of the more inclusive discussions of ideas, they should be employed together.

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